History of San Mateo County from the Earliest Times: With ...
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1916 - San Mateo County (Calif.)

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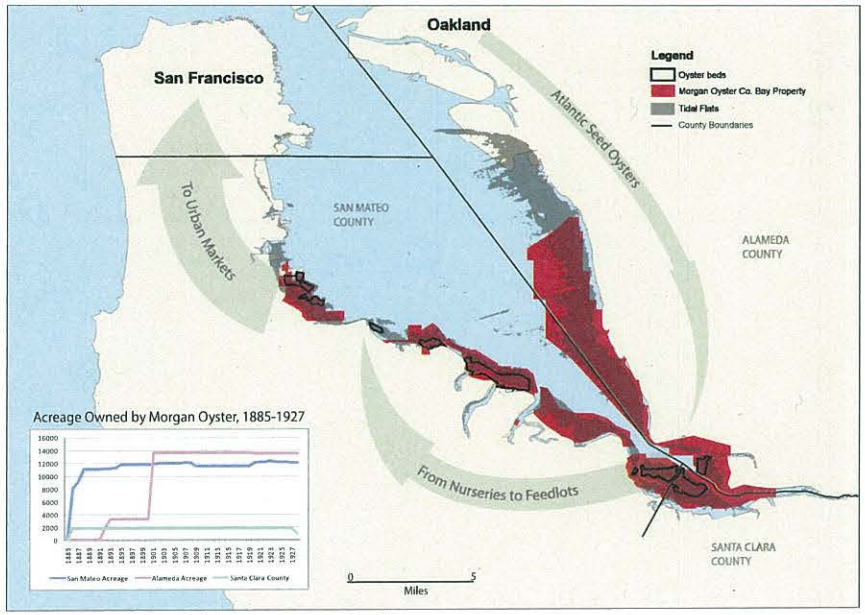
red blooded man who likes to get out with gun and dog During the first few days of the open season hundreds of rabbit hunters make their way to the various parts of the county Most of them return with goodly bags San Mateo was one of the first if not the first to give rabbits the protection of a closed season This law was found to be so satisfactory that sometime later a state law was passed giving state wide protection during part of the year The grey tree squirrel is no longer considered game in San Mateo County They are worth more alive from the aesthetic point of view to satisfy the outer man than they are dead to satisfy the inner man Squirrels are found more or less commonly throughout the wooded parts of the county In parts they are very common even within the incorporated limits of the cities along the bay shore Marsh shooting in San Mateo County has not improved during recent years Formerly the salt ponds on the bay shore afforded excellent duck shooting but in recent years ducks have become noticeably scarce There is still in the fall of the year an excellent flight of ducks in the morning and evening between the Spring Valley lakes and the bay but shooting is limited to a few moments at that time and it is difficult to get more than a few birds Better bags of ducks are secured by those hunters skilled in the use of a skulling oar but this sort of hunting is rather hard work for the average hunter and is not commonly resorted to Rail shooting has

The Production of Space in San Francisco Bay

Morgan Oyster Holdings, 1909: Height of Bay Oyster Industry



The Rise of Morgan Oyster Company

In the nineteenth century, oysters were an everyday food for working people. As San Francisco grew in the late nineteenth century, so also did its appetite for the mollusks. Sediment from mining upstream on the Sacramento River destroyed native oyster beds during the Gold Rush. In the years immediately following completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, oyster producers imported seeds of the larger and tastier Atlantic oyster by rail and planted them in the Bay, where they grew quickly but could not reproduce due to environmental conditions. As a result, the Bay became a feedlot for transplanted eastern oysters, which were fattened on the fertile bay floor before being sold and consumed in San Francisco. The oyster industry in San Francisco quickly became a business in which fortunes were made by selling a high volume of oysters at low prices.

Owning the Tidal Flats. Oyster producers erected fences to fend off bat rays, a natural predator, and built guard houses on the beds to thwart oyster pirates. (Photo 1896)

But by the first decade of the twentieth century, oyster production in San Francisco was a virtual monopoly, controlled by the Morgan Company. Given the size of the Bay, how was it possible that a few oyster beds on the western shore constituted a monopoly of production? Why didn't oyster growers use other parts of the Bay? By mapping possible oyster habitat and bay ownership, this project got closer to answering those questions, and opened a network of new historical questions.

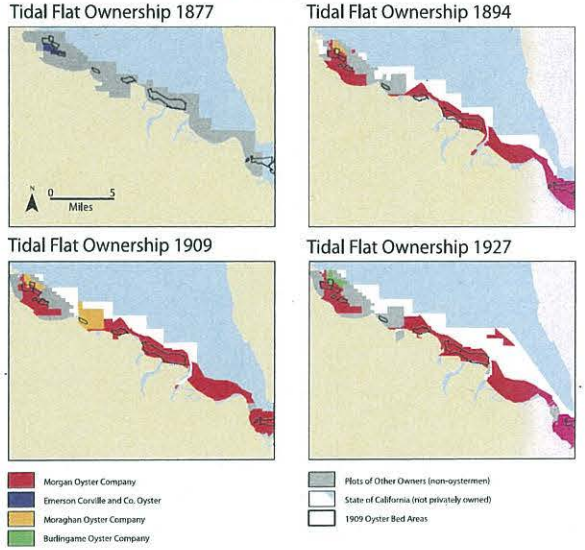
Using historical bathymetry data this project mapped possible oyster habitat (defined as two feet above and below "mean low tide" using documented criteria of oyster producers as well as the location of actual beds). Maps of assessed property show that by 1909 Morgan controlled virtually all of the productive oyster space within San Francisco Bay.

In addition to controlling oyster habitat, the Morgan Company's control of tidelands allowed it to implement a highly efficient system of production that exploited natural advantages of particular spaces within the bay. Oysters were unloaded from trains in Oakland, sailed south and planted near the Dumbarton crossing, culled as young adults and replanted in fattening beds south of San Francisco, then harvested and brought to market in the city. It was control of property and space that allowed Morgan to institute this vast and dynamic system of production and gave his company an advantage over competitors.

Consolidating Oyster Space

The maps to the right show five decades of change in bay ownership in San Mateo County (south of San Francisco), based on official county maps from those years. In 1868, the state of California parceled out the San Francisco Bay tidelands for sale by county, with a variety of owners bidding on and gaining ownership in San Mateo County. Tidelands in San Mateo County, the most desirable and contested in the South Bay, underwent significant ownership changes early on, but between 1886 and 1888 Morgan Oyster Company consolidated most of the eastern San Mateo tidelands under a single owner. Morgan's early purchases show an interest in accumulating productive oyster habitats extensive enough to support a dynamic system of production that provided unique advantages. Those who attempted to compete in the oyster industry never lasted long. Controlling the tidal flats of San Mateo County also enabled Morgan Oyster to sell tracts only on favorable terms, and the company rarely parted with lands even into the late 1920s, fifteen years after the oyster industry had dramatically declined.

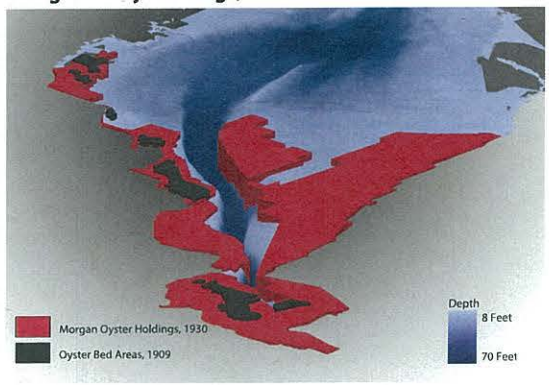
San Mateo County Bay Ownership 1877-1927



Beyond Oyster Space?

As the Morgan Company continued to accrue wealth from oyster production, deed records indicate the company expanded its ownership farther into the Bay. Overlaying complete property holdings (both taxed and untaxed) with bathymetry data creates a map that provides new evidence of Morgan's intentions. In addition to the property plotted on this map, Morgan controlled 5,000 acres of the Bay through lease. Much, if not most of the leased land was non-oyster habitat. Outside the channel, which could not be owned, Morgan controlled virtually all usable bay lands. Morgan increasingly dominated San Francisco Bay as the company acquired and maintained oyster habitat, as well as "strategic" or speculative parcels of the Bay. It is plausible that Morgan extended his ownership in the interest of protecting his particular industry by excluding other users. By 1930, however, this could no longer be the case; the oyster industry had collapsed nearly two decades earlier. Morgan had moved beyond oysters.

Morgan's Bay Holdings, 1930



Conclusion

Mapping bathymetry against property allowed us to understand the relationship of ownership and oyster habitat over time. The maps presented here are not illustrations of historical speculations or conclusions drawn from documents. Rather, they serve as evidence in their own right and have led to a new set of conclusions about oyster production and bay ownership and speculation. Morgan Company held a monopoly because it controlled oyster habitat. But as time passed, Morgan also speculated in property, buying pieces of the Bay that held little productive value, but which might have had strategic value as the Bay became a site for railroads, pipelines, and uses that made bay ownership profitable in other ways. Morgan came to see the Bay less as a productive space and increasingly as an opportunity to speculate, where ownership of a key piece of real estate could offer large returns.

Matthew Booker, Andrew Robichaud, Gabriel Lee, Alec Norton. HIS. 401a, Spatial History Concepts, Methods and Problems

Peninsula oyster farms

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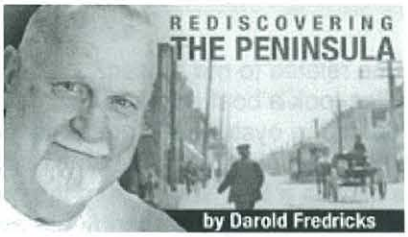

The Goldrush Era of the 1840s and '50s created a desire by the new rich for exotic food like oysters. The Bay's oysters had been eaten by the local native Americans for thousands of years, but they (Ostrea lucida) were small, poor tasting and not up to the standards of the suddenly wealthy.

Before 1869, importing fresh oysters from the East was impossible as slow-moving ships were the only means of transportation. Finally, a source was found considerably closer in Shoalwater Bay, Washington, but it was still risky getting them here fresh and inexpensive enough.

Captain John Stillwell Morgan, recently from New York and failing in his attempt to strike it rich in the goldfields, decided to settle in a house at Chestnut and Spring streets in Redwood City. He and four partners organized the Morgan Oyster Company with the intent of growing edible oysters for the bustling market of the Bay area. They began acquiring tidal land at Point Slough, Redwood Creek and Greco Island, as well as off the Millbrae flats, Coyote Point and Dumbarton Bridge, and began "seeding" these tidal flats in San Mateo County.

The operation was successful and, with the completion of the railroad in 1869, Eastern 'seeds' of oysters were transported to the Bay and improved oysters were grown. Morgan laid claim to over 3000 acres of tidal flats along the edge of the south Bay and became the largest producer of oysters for many years.

Many intensive beds were cultivated along the shore and miles from the shore as well. Much of the southern Bay is very shallow (less than 20 feet), perfect for this type of operation.

Oyster processing houses at the Millbrae flats, Coyote Point and Dumbarton Bridge and 'watch houses' were built in which men could live and work as well as protect their investments from "raiders." These lonely, isolated cottages, sometimes miles from the shore, were enclosed in picket fences to ward off raiders and stingrays that also relished eating oysters.

One such cottage was situated off 17-Mile Point (eastern Millbrae Avenue) and supplied fresh oysters to the 17-Mile House's restaurant that was on the El Camino Real in the 1800s. The shed stood until 1940 when it was torn down for the expansion of the San Francisco International Airport.

There was a house built in the Bay in South Belmont, a house two miles southeast of Dumbarton Point, a house in North Belmont and one at Coyote Point. The South and North Belmont houses were at the entrances to Belmont and Steinberger Creeks.

Many of the oyster beds were later acquired by the Pacific Portland Cement Company that located its main cement-making plant in Redwood City and dredged huge amounts of oyster shells from the Bay for use in making cement.

The Morgan Oyster Farm's beds were finally covered over with silt and dirt from the Millbrae hills when the Macco Pit was excavated to supply landfill for the expanding San Francisco Airport in the 1940s and '50s.

Eighty-three year old Arthur Andersen of Burlingame related to me an escapade by him and his buddies that occurred in the '20s. He and his buddies took a boat one night from the Coyote Point beach near the shack of Indian Joe. They rowed out to the oyster beds and proceeded to take a few oysters for themselves. A guard suddenly turned on a searchlight and when he spotted them, he unloaded his shotgun at them. Arthur said he was hit with a few "shots" from the gun, but wasn't hurt badly. The boys rowed back to the beach, only to be met by the sheriff (he never said how the sheriff knew about the shooting) and Indian Joe. After a few sharp words of reprimand, the sheriff kicked the boys in the rear and sent them home.

Pollution and fear of pollution drove the oyster-growing operations out of the Bay with some companies starting up miles north along the ocean around Point Reyes and other shallow protected areas. The numerous shell mounds along the creeks on the Peninsula where the Indians had collected and eaten oysters for thousands of years have been destroyed or scattered with the development of streets and houses along the creeks.

Rediscovering the peninsula appears in the Monday edition of The San Mateo Daily Journal.